Politics

Labour leadership at war over claims of plot by the hard-Left

Corbyn and his shadow chancellor row in public with deputy – then leader is heckled by his own MPs

By **Laura Hughes**
POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

LABOUR'S leadership was in open conflict last night amid accusations of a hard-Left "plot" to take over the party.

Tom Watson, Labour's deputy leader, warned yesterday that the future of the party was at stake over claims that a campaign group which backs Jeremy Corbyn is planning to officially link with a union.

His intervention prompted a furious response from allies of Jeremy Corbyn who accused him of "interfering" in the Unite leadership election in an attempt to oust Len McCluskey.

John McDonnell, the shadow chancellor, said he was "disappointed" with Mr Watson's comments while other members of the shadow cabinet turned on him during a tense meeting.

Labour's fresh turmoil came as an ICM survey for *The Guardian* found the Tories received approval ratings of 45 per cent, up one point in two weeks, while Labour has dropped back two points to 26 per cent.

Despite the fact the poll was carried out after the Government's U-turn on National Insurance payments, the Prime Minister and Chancellor were rated the best team to manage the economy. They were backed by 44 per cent, while Mr Corbyn and Mr McDonnell were on just 11 per cent.

Mr Watson called on Mr Corbyn to "deal with" his supporters after Jon Lansman, the Momentum leader, was secretly recorded saying it plans to link with Unite. The move would give the grassroots organisation access to huge funding and institutional support. Mr Watson told Radio 4's *Today* this was now a "battle for the future existence" of the party. But Mr McDonnell, talking to the BBC, said of Mr Watson: "This is not civil war...What he is trying to do is influence the election of the general secretary of Unite and he has dragged the Labour Party into this, completely unnecessarily. It's all about Tom and the internal battle he is trying to wage within Unite. Dragging the party into this is disappointing."

'He is trying to influence the election of the general secretary of Unite and has dragged the party into this'

Mr Corbyn and Mr Watson later issued a joint statement following a shadow cabinet "away day" in central London. They agreed to strengthen party unity and said "no one speaks for the leadership except the leadership themselves and their spokespeople." According to sources present at the away day, Mr Watson was criticised by his colleagues in the shadow cabinet for publicly hitting out at Mr Lansman.

He was told that "this kind of intervention is damaging in elections – this behaviour does us no good".

In a recording obtained by *The Observer*, Mr Lansman tells a Momentum meeting: "Assuming that Len McCluskey wins the general secretaryship, which I think he will, Unite will affiliate to Momentum and will fully participate in Momentum, as will the CWU."

He went on to tell activists it was "absolutely crucial" that they secured a change to the party's rules to ensure that whenever Mr Corbyn stood down, they were able to get a candidate on to the ballot paper to succeed him.

Unite's acting general secretary Gail Cartmail said: "Tom Watson has made claims about Unite and its general secretary Len McCluskey which are entirely inaccurate. It is exclusively for our executive council to determine which organisations we affiliate to.

"There are no plans for Unite to affiliate to Momentum. Len McCluskey has never met Jon Lansman to discuss this or any other matter."

Last night Mr Corbyn was heckled by his MPs at a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party. It broke up with Mr Corbyn walking off alone. Mr Watson described it as "lively" while an aide to Mr Corbyn said it was a "robust and open debate".

Editorial Comment: Page 17

NINE LEVIS/TOPSHOT

MPs accuse BBC of falling short of duty to be impartial on Brexit

Continued from Page 1

Boris Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, hit out at the corporation's "infuriating" and "shamelessly anti-Brexit coverage".

An analysis of a series of programmes on BBC Radio 4 found that listeners were two-and-a-half times more likely to hear a pro-EU speaker than an anti-EU one.

A total of 72 MPs have signed the letter, including three Labour MPs, eight DUP MPs and Douglas Carswell, Ukip's only MP.

Prominent Conservatives who have signed the letter include Iain Duncan Smith, the former work and pensions secretary, and Owen Paterson, the former environment secretary.

The letter opens by highlighting the Royal Charter, which formally enshrines the corporation's duty to be impartial in its news coverage.

MPs say that the corporation has "fallen far short of this high standard" in its Brexit coverage since the referendum. "If politicians and the public don't view it as an impartial broker, then the future of the BBC will be in doubt," they say.

The BBC has also failed to represent the views of those who voted to leave the European Union and want to make a success of it, "weakening" its bond with the 52 per cent who backed Brexit, the letter states.

"In particular, the Corporation's focus on 'regretful' Leave voters, despite there being no polling shift towards Remain since the referendum, has led some to believe it is putting its preconceptions before the facts," the letter says.

The corporation is also accused of reporting the "posturing and private opinions" of EU leaders over issues such as a potential Brexit divorce bill as "fact".

Julian Knight, a former BBC journalist who is now an MP and helped organise the letter, said: "The next two years present the biggest journalistic challenge to the BBC of our lifetimes and it simply has to get this right.

"I am really worried that if it continues to go down the road it has been it will alienate itself from 52 per cent of the voting public and many of those like me who wanted Remain but accept the decision and just want what is best for our country. "

He also warned that the BBC should do more to hold the SNP to account, adding that it could "do with dwelling a bit more on its own title".

A BBC spokesman said: "The BBC is covering the political and financial events following the referendum vote in a responsible and impartial way.

"The BBC is also one of the great exports of this country and makes a significant contribution to the UK creative sector."

Jean Claude-Juncker, the president of the European Commission, yesterday suggested Britain will be treated so harshly over Brexit that no other countries will want to leave the EU.

Sturgeon calls May's stance on new independence vote 'indefensible'

By **Simon Johnson**
SCOTTISH POLITICAL EDITOR

THERESA MAY is preparing for a possible showdown with Nicola Sturgeon next week over a second independence referendum after relations between the two governments yesterday sank to a new low.

The Daily Telegraph understands the Prime Minister will visit Scotland early next week as part of a promise to consult all the devolved administrations ahead of triggering Article 50.

Although Mrs May yesterday held talks with Carwyn Jones, the Welsh First Minister, in Swansea, Government sources had said it was "not inevitable" she would meet Ms Sturgeon.

However, yesterday they said it was now likely that the First Minister would be contacted with an offer of talks. Relations were already at breaking point after Ms Sturgeon last week attempted to ambush Mrs May with her demand of a second independence referendum.

Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish First Minister, is asking MSPs to back her in pushing Theresa May for a new referendum

Mrs May then infuriated the First Minister by rejecting another independence vote until Brexit has bedded in.

Yesterday Ms Sturgeon hit out at Mrs May for failing to inform her about the date for the triggering of Article 50 before it was announced to the media. The First Minister also tabled a motion at the Scottish Parliament seeking the go-ahead for talks with the UK Government over a second referendum and warned the Prime Minister that her opposition will become "democratically indefensible" if she wins as expected MSPs' approval in a vote to be held tomorrow evening.

The Prime Minister yesterday dismissed the criticism that she had not kept the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish administrations up to date.

She said: "We have been talking with the Welsh Government for the past few months and with the other devolved administrations about the process, about the timetable. I have always said it would be before the end of March and we will continue talking to them."

A portrait of the PM, comfortable in her own fashion

Fashion commentary

By **Bethan Holt**

Theresa May chose a subscription to *Vogue* magazine as her *Desert Island Discs* luxury item, so one can only imagine her delight to become the first British prime minister to be featured within the hallowed sartorial pages of the American edition. But, ever the sensible stoic, she did not let the excitement get the better of her, opting for a polished, pared-back look in the portraits shot by Annie Leibovitz.

Clearly, Mrs May has learnt from Trousergate, which consumed Westminster observers late last year after she was photographed in a pair of £995 Amanda Wakeley brown leather trousers for a magazine photo shoot. In some quarters, Mrs May was applauded for her daring choice, a poster woman for a generation which no longer concedes that ageing means dialling things down. But soon, the thorny issue of JAMs – the Just-About-Managing whom Mrs May has promised to help – was raised. How would this ostentatious fashion statement look to them?

In the *Vogue* images, Mrs May is poised in a navy £225 dress and matching £425 coat, both by British label L.K.Bennett. The fashion crowd might be disappointed not to see the PM flying the London fashion week flag, lighting up Chequers in a sumptuously colourful dress by Roksanda or a Christopher Kane biker jacket, but her choice to wear one of the country's best-loved workwear brands makes perfect sense and the look is an expertly pitched level of chic.

Not that Mrs May has completely conceded to the trousermoaners. In a second shot of her striding the grounds beside husband Phillip, she wears a £450 red coat layered over a made-to-order £1200 cashmere jumper, both from conceptual London-based brand Egg, offering the subtlest hint of luxe. To balance things out, the patent boots are an old pair of Russell and Bromleys.

Mrs May fashion watchers might be disappointed to learn that we might not see the Black Watch tartan Vivienne Westwood suit again any time soon. It was labelled her "lucky suit" after she wore it both on the day she announced her Tory party leadership bid and to deliver the speech she gave in January setting out her Brexit plans. "I think I'm going to stop wearing it now," Mrs May tells *Vogue* "irritably".

The PM is stoical about the attention her clothes attract: "It doesn't stop me from going out and enjoying fashion," she says of the commentary on her outfits. "And I also think it's important to be able to show that a woman can do a job like this and still be interested in clothes." Hear, hear.

Comparisons to Margaret Thatcher might cause Mrs May to bristle – "I'm Theresa May. I do things my way" – but the two women's quotes on fashion are uncannily similar. "I am passionately interested in fashion. It brings both pleasure – because being well-dressed gives everyone pleasure – and it brings jobs," Thatcher told British *Vogue* in 1985. More than 20 years on, her successor continues to prove the point admirably.

Theresa May with husband Philip at Chequers for the photo shoot with the American edition of Vogue, balancing her £450 red coat and £1200 cashmere jumper with an old pair of boots

'My jobs enhance Parliament': Osborne makes light work of his afternoon shift

Sketch

By **Michael Deacon**

Yesterday afternoon, for 35 minutes, the Commons was graced by a very special visitor: George Osborne.

These days, sadly, the former chancellor's busy schedule rarely permits him to participate in parliamentary debate, what with his commitments as Archbishop of York, chairman of the RSPB and presenter of *Homes Under the Hammer*, but yesterday he took a break from compiling the Norton Anthology of 21st Century Verse to pop into the chamber. MPs were no doubt delighted to see him, because it just so happened that he was the subject under discussion. Andrew Gwynne (Lab, Denton & Reddish) wanted to know how it could possibly be right for Mr Osborne to take on his latest role – editor of London's *Evening Standard* – while remaining MP for Tatton in Cheshire.

"To hold several time-consuming outside commitments" that created conflicts of interest with an MP's duties, protested Mr Gwynne, was "impossible to defend".

Reclining languidly on the Conservative back benches, Mr Osborne appeared unfazed. Indeed, he looked positively cheerful. Perhaps he was still basking in the glory of his winning goal for Tottenham Hotspur against Southampton 24 hours earlier, or his triumph in the Best Actress category at Sunday night's Empire Film Awards. At any rate, he was in such a good mood that he decided to chip in with a little joke. "I thought it was important to be here, Mr Speaker," he chirped, "although unfortunately we've missed the deadline for the *Evening Standard*."

For some reason, MPs from other parties didn't seem amused. "In my view," continued Mr Osborne airily, "this Parliament is enhanced when we have people of different experience taking part in our robust debates."

In other words: he's doing it for our own good. You'd think people would be more grateful.

Even by Mr Osborne's standards, it was a performance of spectacular insouciance. Happily, his fellow Tory MPs were universally supportive.

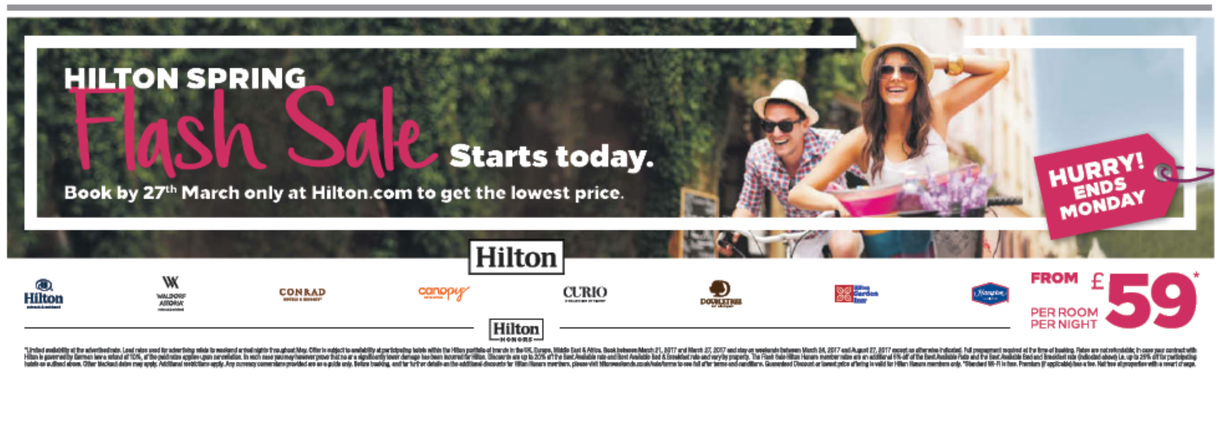
'Even by Mr Osborne's standards, it was a performance of spectacular insouciance. Happily, his fellow Tory MPs were universally supportive'

"Is it not the case that we believe in a free press, and therefore a proprietor should have the right to appoint who they wish as editor?" asked Michael Gove, who on top of his £74,962 salary as MP for Surrey Heath is paid £150,000 a year to write a column for *The Times*.

"Many people in this House," added Tom Tugendhat (Con, Tonbridge & Malling), "have a second job." True, although unlike Mr Osborne, few have a third, fourth, fifth and sixth job.

Liz McInnes (Lab, Heywood & Middleton) offered sympathy. Would parliamentary authorities take into account the European Working Time Directive and ensure he didn't damage his health by working excessive hours?

"My right honourable friend was industrious when rescuing this country's economy," replied Ben Gummer, the Cabinet Office minister. "No doubt he will continue to be industrious in whatever form he wishes to take." Mr Osborne looked up, nodded graciously, and then returned to the score of his new opera.



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